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ABSTRACT

This paper establishes a rationale and preliminary model for the examination of the "holy men and women" narratives in contemporary democratic education. The overarching assumption is that education is the primary institution for reclaiming historical narratives and creating new ones about individuals whose lives can serve as deeply satisfying examples for postmodern society. The report asserts that within the diverse strands of both Eastern and Western cultures there are rich traditions that exult heroes and heroines for their achievements as spiritual and moral beings, rather than the rich and famous in business, sports, or entertainment fields. The paper focuses on those spiritually extraordinary individuals who are purported to have existed and whose lives are chronicled in narrative accounts. The common bond they share is the exceptional effort exerted in their lives to attain unity with the Deity and for their lives to manifest the consequences of that union. (EH)

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THE HOLY MEN AND WOMEN NARRATIVES: A TRADITION FOR EXAMINATION IN DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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THE HOLY MEN AND WOMEN NARRATIVES:

A TRADITION FOR EXAMINATION IN DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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It is inevitable that every culture has its heroes and heroines. These are the celebrated individuals who express in their lives the ideal standard of life popularly envied. In our contemporary society, we have selected our heroes and heroines from the rich and famous in business, sports, and entertainment fields. For the most part, our heroes and heroines fail us as exemplars of conduct that can satisfy our deepest human need for a life in quest of transcendent meaning. To be sure, on most of our lists for "admired people" there will be a place for an individual like Mother Theresa or Mahatma Gandhi. But few of us want our lives to be committed totally to the spiritual quest.

However, within the diverse strands of both Eastern and Western cultures, there are rich traditions that exult heroes and heroines for their achievements as spiritual and moral beings. Many of these individuals were featured in primordial cultural myths and did not participate in real human existence. While others are at least purported to have existed and their lives are chronicled in narrative accounts. It is about the latter we are concerned here. Even though these spiritually and morally extraordinary individuals are named differently according to various traditions, for the sake of consistency, I will refer to the narratives about them as "the holy men and women tradition". The common bond they share is the exceptional effort exerted in their lives to attain unity with the Deity and for their lives to manifest the consequences of that union. The point of this paper is to set out a

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rationale and preliminary model for the examination of these holy men and women narratives in contemporary, democratic education. The overarching assumption is that education is our primary institution for reclaiming historical narratives and creating new ones about individuals whose lives can serve as deeply satisfying examples for a postmodern society.

CHRISTIAN SAINTS & WESTERN CULTURE: A CASE IN POINT

As noted earlier, many historical cultures depicted their cultural exemplars as religiously holy -- whether identified as world renouncers in Buddhism, the righteous ones in Judaism, prophets in Isalam, or saints in Christianity (Hawley, 1987). Because the cult of the "saints" has been such an important tradition in Christianity, it goes a long way in explaining the current deficit in satisfying spiritual exemplars. The tradition of saints and narratives about them (hagiography) evolved for very socially functional reasons in late antiquity, according to Peter Brown (1981). A need arose throughout villages of the eastern Mediterranean for men beyond moral reproach -- "holy men" -- to serve as rural patrons, charismatic ombudsmen, and moral catalysts within the community. A parallel recognition of the "holy women" role merged with this tradition into a subsequent formal process of identifying, chronicling, verifying, and designating these holy men and women as saints.

While living, these gifted spiritual individuals attracted throngs of individuals who sought their counsel, healing, and blessing. The analogy to the cultural importance of contemporary sports and music celebrities is evident. After their death and the successful designation of "saint" as a result of the formal canonization process, cults developed for the saints in general as well as particular individuals. The core of the cult was the saga of the saint's life, which chronicled the heroic spiritual quest of the saint's life. The pious followers made pilgrimages to shrines in honor of the saints, where the pilgrims hoped to gain physical healing and salvation for the soul. Likewise, devout identified

their namesake saint as a "patron saint," an invisible friends to help the individual ward off evil and successfully make the crossing to heaven.

The cult of the saints served an important function in Christianity throughout the Middle Ages. The biographical narratives served as concrete ideals for the Christian's life and the veneration of relics, shrines, patron saints, and the simultaneous system of indulgences gave hope for both this life and the next in the midst of a harsh existence. Understandably, the cult of the saints bred abuses and extravagances in many instances. Bogus events or distortions were woven into the narratives of many biographies of the saints; even bogus saints were created in a few instances. Opportunistic entrepreneurs, both clerical and lay, exploited financially the cult activities through the sale of relics and indulgences. The more fundamental problem for many believers was that the veneration of the saints for many reached such proportions in their daily lives that it was replacing the Godhead and Christian mysteries as the objects of their faith. In response to such devotional abuses, the Reformation attempted to restore a pure and direct spiritual relationship with God. Almost all the reformers wanted to marginalize veneration to the saints as an intrusion on the personal relationship of the soul with God. The deemphasis on the narratives and veneration of holy men and women in the subsequent Protestant Christianity tradition had an impact on the curriculum of the common school movement and beyond in American education.

RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

During the Post Reformation period, the Roman Catholic tradition continued the veneration of the saints but with closer scrutiny of accuracy in biographical narratives and monitoring of devotional practices. The narrative biographies of the saints were still an important part of the liturgical calendar and the curriculum in religious education. The main purpose of these narratives

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was to inspire the faithful to follow the lead of the saints in imitating the life of the Christ. In the late 19th century, Butler published a 4-volume series of lives of the saints to accompany the commemoration of the saints during the liturgical calendar year. While Butler's biographies had purged many of the apocryphal events of hagiography of the middle ages, large sections of his Lives still relied on the findings of dubious historical scholarship. His objective to offer inspirational exemplars for imitation and intercession still trumped the commitment to veracious reportage.

In the common school tradition of American public education, however, the examination of biographies of spiritually gifted individuals, especially Catholic saints, had very little significance. And the role it did have through the middle of the twentieth century has gradually diminished to the point that a recent ASCD report concluded that "references to religious figures, qua religious figures, has all but been excised from the contemporary public school curriculum.". (1987, p.7) There are several interrelated reasons for this carefully circumscribed role examining religious figures in the public curriculum. First, during the first several decades of the common school movement, the intimate relationship of Reformation denominations with public education emphasized the reading of the King James Bible and prayer but minimized any veneration of religious heroes/heroines, especially if it suggested any intercessory role to these individuals. At the same time, American society was gradually becoming secularized -- replacing transcendent, spiritual ideal with more this worldly, material goals. The Horatio Alger "rags to riches" sagas expressed the secularizing spirit of the time. The Protestant churches had begun to absorb some of this secularizing spirit in the form of what has been termed "the Protestant work ethic". For public education the blending of these two influences resulted in a curriculum which extolled certain virtues, such as industriousness and truthfulness, through narratives about ideal individuals, but that the specific religiosity of their personalities and

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accomplishments were not highlighted. The study of the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson are good examples of this.

In more recent times, the intimate relationship between Protestantism and American public life has significantly accommodated to the emergence of a "thick wall" of church-state separation mentality. Stephen Carter, among others, attributes this "thick wall" mentality, in large part, to a widespread fear that the ultraconservative religious right will gain control of public policy, if the religious voice is allowed to be expressed very loudly.(1993) For education, this has meant that the study of religious institutions, movements, and religious figures have been excluded from the official curriculum, at least insofar as they are treated as religious phenomena. Even Martin Luther King, in most basal readers and social studies texts is treated as a civil rights advocate but mention of his religious vision, motivation, or affiliation is never mentioned. So, narratives about "holy men and women", as moral models, is very faint within the official public school curriculum.

RENEWED INTEREST: SPRITUALLY GIFTED INVIDUALS

For the reasons stated above, there has been a suspicion and reluctance to place too high a premium on the exaltation or the popular acceptance of the spiritually gifted as role leaders. We carry the inheritance of of a post Reformation tradition that minimizes human veneration and a Western history replete with religious charlatanism and magical practices. Nonetheless, there are several cultural forces that are prompting thoughtful individuals to once again examine narratives of spiritually gifted individuals as meaningful sources of cultural renewal.

Contemporary society has become increasingly dissatisfied with the prevailing models of the good life that emphasize unbridled material gratification, individual competition, and supreme confidence in domination of the planet through technological advancement. These models have

not resulted in the anticipated social sense of well-being; rather, our society is characterized by pervasive, personal anxiety. An important impetus for women's studies and multicultural inquiry has been the hope of locating previously-excluded sources of meaning useful for cultural renewal. Inevitably, such pursuits gravitate toward fascinating studies of individuals who by any standards were spiritually gifted, such as Teresa of Avila or Mahatma Gandhi.

It is not surprising that spiritually gifted individuals should emerge as objects of concentrated inquiry. As many eminent scholars have pointed out, such as Mircea Eliade (1957) and Robert Bellah (1975), the religious dimension of a culture or culture-like groupings is central to its ethos. The inquiry about these central cultural figures can take the form of critical/revised editions of their works, interpretations and critical interpretation of their ideas and/or writings, and examining narrative accounts of their lives.

It is the renewed attention to narrative accounts of spiritually gifted individuals and its educational implications that is of particular interest to us. The narrative biographies of these spiritually gifted individuals are important texts for concretizing the ideals of a particular culture and historical period as well as the basis for an understanding of the dialectical relationship between the ideas/writings of the individual and his/her life. In almost all cases, the extant biographical narratives are clearly products of their original times. Subsequent historical reasearch as well as different social needs of our times require the revision of these biographical narratives.

STUDY OF SPIRITUALLY GIFTED IN EDUCATION

It is my contention that the examination of narrative biographies of the spiritually gifted in diverse cultures deserves the systematic inclusion in public education as part of a rich program of multicultural education and religious literacy.

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